

Spot-Checking the Emperor

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In Bika Reed's inspired 1979 translation of Berlin Papyrus 3024, she identifies a donkey-headed manifestation of the sun-god Ra that you won't find in many popular mythology texts listing ancient Egyptian gods. His name is Iai, and he is called the Rebel in the Soul. He's the one who questions and challenges what is regarded as proper and true in a life and a culture, the one who stands his ground and stubbornly resists what's generally accepted and what we'd rather believe. He's the tester, the troublemaker. Or, if you like, the quality control. The main thing is, Iai can't help himself. He has a job to do.

Today I'm going to tell you some things you already know. You've just heard some of my qualifications for this: Reviewer of Science Fiction / Fantasy and Horror for *The Australian* for 13 years under two different lit editors, doing columns for *The Bulletin* in that time. I'm a highly awarded local author, and so on. But my ultimate qualification for being here today is that, in a very real sense, I'm a Fool. An utter and absolute Fool, a stubborn Prince of Fools and not to be listened to. Today Iai, the Rebel in the Soul, is using me. And first he requires that I reveal a terrible secret. When it comes to writing and storytelling, I do it for the Art! There, it's out. Not for the money. Not for financial gain. The Art. It's the height of Folly, the pinnacle of Fooldom. Yet it's my main qualification for being here this afternoon.

But as Fool I reserve the right to do what Fools have traditionally done, especially in their Shakespearean guise, as in *King Lear*. I'm going to make fun of the Emperor, of the Kings and Queens and Empresses, of the Wizards and Sorceresses, of those with the power of sanction and advantage. It's a risky business and often unwelcome. But it's the curse and the prerogative of Fools, so I'll take it now. And, before I continue, let me give a word both of warning and of consolation. Donkey-headed Iai can't stop doing what he has to do, but he is easily forgotten. Who out there even knows there is a donkey-headed manifestation of Ra called Iai? Anubis, Thoth, Set, Sekhmet, even Ptah and Maat, they'll remember, but Iai? He's easily overlooked.

So, first of all, let me give you the good news, tick the boxes with you and tell you what you know. I'd like to present some points under the heading: Fantastic Fiction as Part of the Great Cure and look at how they relate to CONTEXT:

1. We readily allow the entertainment value of Fantastic Fiction, the simple diversion and wonder it brings, how it permits escape from a stressful life into something larger and better. It can provide a welcome panacea in troubled times, can deliver catharsis and healing. Lester and Judy-Lynn Del Rey knew what they were doing in the mid 70s when they asked Terry Brooks to write *The Sword of Shannara* to cash in on the Tolkien craze and led to the global publishing phenomenon of commercial heroic fantasy and the trilogy. It was to

cash in on something, to deliver product, make money and create the need for more product, but perhaps they sensed something greater. I've always liked to think so.

2. Fantastic Fiction satisfies the deep need for Spirituality and Re-connection, gives constant reaffirmation, providing symbols and enactments for achieving such things. Like many of you, I'm a great admirer of Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung. Whether the Hero Goes on a Journey or the Stranger Comes to Town, these basic stories of the human condition, of the human heart in conflict with itself, *need* to be re-told, lest we forget, lest we forget to remember, and thankfully everything is new to the new-born babe. Even a poor story can be made noble in the mind of the beholder. We take and make our magic where we find it.
3. The popularity of Fantastic Fiction is a response to widespread disempowerment. We need only note symptoms like the increase in road rage, sports violence, domestic violence, serial and sensation crimes, things like gun and drug abuse to realise that in sociological terms there is a great general need for re-empowerment and self-empowerment, for the reaffirmation of the identity. When you disempower someone, they become dangerous, unpredictably and even predictably dangerous. When you disempower large segments of a population, large ideological segments, well, the trends are there to be plotted. But Jung spoke of individuation, of the process of becoming the self. What happens if you disempower that self in the act of individuation? John Fowles' suggestion for there being Nemo, the fear of being nothing, as an equal and opposite force to Ego is most compelling. Empowerment is vital or you have compensating desperation and ruthlessness.
4. Fantastic Fiction can be seen as a response to data saturation and sensory overload, the need for simplification, even the stylisation and conventionalisation of our lives and behaviour. It's where we seek and impose worthy modes and templates, worthy metaphors and paradigms to live by. Here's where I remind us that listening is the most-used communication skill, but the average person has 25% listening effectiveness. There must be other ways for things to get through. Storytelling without frontiers in book fiction, film, computer games and so on can do this, deliver a deeper, more powerful message.
5. Fantastic Fiction can be seen as a healthy response to the message of corporate feudalism, of corporate ethics and consumerism. The foremost of these is:

eg: Truth is always the first casualty of self interest. I keep reminding myself that the English did put torture machines in some of the Spanish Armada wrecks as a useful propaganda tactic. As Kim Stanley Robinson's character says in "Remaking History": "*true* doesn't mean an absolute fidelity to the real." (348) In other words, what have facts got to do with reality? One can catch the spirit of an age in ways that are not wholly contingent on the facts. We have a Channel 7 camera crew

running down the backstreets of a false Majorca after Christopher Skase to provide a suitable visual. We have Richard Carlton standing beside grave 'site' in Bosnia many kilometres from the real burial site, all "to help understanding".

Another lesson that's filtered down to us from corporate ethics? Everyone is a team player preaching team values except for those at the top. The merchant elite does it differently (as do true artists and Fools).

So, in short, like all storytelling, Fantastic Fiction can be a healing, compensating, positive thing, restoring balance and viable symbols and connections. We know this.

So let me tell you something else you already know. And for this part, I'd like to re-introduce myself, if I may, as the Fool, the Court Jester, as the great if often unpopular Clown: Persona Non Grata. I'd put on a donkey head, but passersby might think it's a performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Now I'd like to discuss Fantastic Fiction as Part of the Great Problem:

Once again, fantastic fiction (like all fiction, all art) must be looked at in CONTEXT. All the positives I've mentioned (the re-connection, the resurgence of spirituality, the restoration of viable symbols etc) would be far more acceptable if it weren't for the CONTEXT, the dumbing down of the culture that's presently occurring. Rather than being simply a healthy response to this dumbing down, Iai suggests – not I suggest, Iai suggests – that a great deal of fantastic fiction is in fact a *symptom* of that dumbing down. Let me make this even clearer. Given the circumstances, most commercialised storytelling is a *symptom* of the problem, and many of its practitioners are willing and directed participants. Directly or indirectly, wittingly or unwittingly, they're in collusion, which is fine, so long as the truth is also being told, not just as rarefied metaphor or enactment, not just in the staged paradigm using old legends, a quest or a ring of power, but boldly and clearly so there is no misunderstanding in an age where so many misunderstand so much. So let's look at some aspects of our present CONTEXT.

1. In the 60s, J.G. Ballard warned us about the increasing 'death of affect' – using a psychological term which refers to the flattening of appropriate emotional and behavioural responses to stimuli. It refers to a general desensitisation due to data saturation and sensory overload, and leads to avoidance, evasion, denial and can indicate dysfunctional, even sociopathic behaviour. Ballard's purpose in his novel *Crash*, for instance, was to write a book where the reader would have to examine their motives for finishing it. Many readers missed this important satirical aspect, yet finished the book.
2. There is a trend towards increasingly Pre-Copernican attitudes and levels of knowledge. As Patrick White says in *Flaws in the Glass*: "We tend to confuse surfaces with reality", and there is a general decline of quality in the Pedaea, the general basic education all citizens need to be effective and informed citizens. The focus is increasingly on the superficial. If you wish to judge the health of a society, see what it has forgotten: the lost knowledge, what is known as anamnesis.

eg: in a recent television interview: "well, television's been around for hundreds of years now"; eg: source of the name Big Brother / what causes seasons / how gunpowder is made, electricity, the internal combustion engine, why planes fly, how do you prove the earth is round etc, which are the capitals of which countries?; eg: growing lack of conversation where eye contact is maintained. Use of fillers and imprecision in conversation: you know, sort of, like, yes and no; eg: increase in the spread of urban myths and conspiracy theories. The information vacuum is being filled, but with what? Here I'm always reminded of the *jus prima noctis* – the law of the first night (the *marchetta* or 'maiden rents'), how the average villager in medieval England or France had no way of proving whether it was based on a true law or not. We must protect our right to travel and to read, most of all to question.

3. Our gatekeepers can be bought. Whether through corporate sponsorships or some other kind of personal and social advantage, our heroes and explainers, our spokesmen and women, our politicians and honest voices are often co-opted, the ones who are meant to protect and speak for us, whether in advertising or in giving sanctions, blurbs, opinions. As ever, scorn is used to dismiss those who question and challenge. It's often the first tactic and the most effective. They're nuisances, no-counts, weirdos, disgruntled and envious troublemakers.
4. There is an increasing need for population control / population regulation devices within consumerism. Distractions. Bread and circuses. We have things like political correctness and the public interest. We have censorship. It took something like the trial of pornographer Larry Flynt to remind us that if the sheep legislate for the wolves, they end up legislating for the sheep and we lose the wolves. We begin to see the importance of being an 'enemy of the people' in the sense that Ibsen meant it.
5. One of the most crucial aspects of CONTEXT to be considered is what it means to inhabit a marketing driven society rather than a quality-driven society or a truth-driven society: whether we're discussing fiction, film, fashion, architecture, television news, almost anything that can be a consumer choice. Marketing departments don't want change unless they can (a) control it, and (b) cash in on it. One very familiar example? Brand names used to be on the inside or modestly stated. Now they're on the outside and often become the reason for the purchase. If someone is wearing a brand-name that's visible, there's a good chance they've been conned. Instead of being *paid* to advertise, they do it freely, may have been conned into thinking they gain class and cool by association. Someone else is laughing all the way to the bank and you're fulfilling expected and planned behaviour. If history has taught us anything, it's that, by its nature, you ultimately *cannot* automatically *buy* class or quality, but who knows history these days? It's increasingly as Harlan Ellison says: "Nostalgia is what we had for breakfast". As Sven Beikerts (in *The Gutenberg Elegies*) reminds us: we're losing our sense of deep time and vertical reading.

I know how strident, intense and over-serious all this sounds, but nothing exists in a vacuum: certainly not storytelling. CONTEXT is everything. And this is just a panel discussion and Iai – and I – will soon be gone. But present marketing trends lead to the lowest common denominator in almost every area of human activity, while emphasising specialness. It leads to conventionalisation and blanding down, even to the appropriation of labels (like sf and fantasy), of modes and jargon so there can be no discourse without reification – getting what you set out to find because that's what you want to find: it's the trend towards self-enshrining and self-endorsement. It leads to the forced creation and loading of genres, the controlling for gain of things like modes and perceptions, expectations and specialness. It's all part of what the Surrealists were reacting against in the early decades of last century, what Ballard has long been reacting against, what in the 70s doing my MA at this University I tried to do when I identified a condition I called the Second Reality Crisis. Marketing departments not only appropriate the labels but also the bestowing of value, so that very mediocre and derivative work is called 'best-seller', 'blockbuster', 'brilliant' and 'special' when it's not. I've taught marketing and it's the first position I know to take. It's self-enshrining, it's a con job and it's lying, but when you hear a song long enough it becomes received knowledge, part of the soundtrack of your life. As Don Henley of The Eagles said: "Old buildings, politicians and whores all become respectable if they stick around long enough." As Fool, I'm spot-checking the Emperor, and, once again, he has no clothes on. Let me quote Ursula Le Guin from her introduction to *Tales from Earthsea*: "Commodified fantasy takes no risks: it invents nothing, but imitates and trivialises. It proceeds by depriving the old stories of their intellectual and ethical complexity, turning their action to violence, their actors to dolls, and their truth-telling to sentimental platitude."

6. A final aspect of CONTEXT. The global village is gifted but dumb; it's regulated and self-deceiving, almost by default. There is little discrimination or critical analysis – hence the need for gatekeepers and explainers more than ever. "If you make people think they're thinking, they'll love you. If you make them really think, they'll hate you." Again, it's bread and circuses time – keep the people distracted and limit what they know. The last thing you wish to engage is their critical faculties. That's true for marketing and managing populations and it's something I learnt as a soldier during the Vietnam War where lying and 'need to know' were supposed to be for the general good.

It would be nice to say that some sort of healthy compromise is possible. We do get it, often by sheer force of talent and inspiration, but mostly it's otherwise. The marketing forces win and what passes for quality fantastic fiction is mostly very ordinary, very safe, very derivative fare. At its worst, alas surprisingly common, it's caricature, burlesque and self-satire, but the need for the positives I've mentioned is so great that even the mediocre can serve. Even a poor meal can satisfy hunger if the hunger is great enough.

The best storytelling glosses and extends a society by constantly testing it, by challenging the canon, questioning the assumptions, modes and conventions. It is subversive, dangerous and brave. It often uses the incredibly liberating violence of overturning form and expectation. Books and films exist as entertainment, but they also exist as vectors (with magnitude and direction). The direction is important because it indicates the range of what's available, good and bad, high and low, the shape and scale, the health of the context, the state of the commonwealth (in the real sense of that word: the great and common good). Put in the proper CONTEXT, the situation is not so healthy. The Emperor has fewer clothes on than we thought and his wardrobe is full of borrowed, brand-name, designer clothes just like them.

Still, there's hope. Some people are taking risks - China Mieville in *The Scar*, Mary Gentle in *Ash: A Secret History*, John Crowley in *Little, Big*, Neil Gaiman in *The Sandman*, to name just a few writers – in this case – who remind us that all fiction is fantasy, that fantasy and fantastic fiction has the power to be rich and different and strange. Just as there is hope in independent film-making, in the independent music labels – we look to the small presses, what we might call the 'micro-bookeries', when they're not busily imitating the big players. Though it's getting harder for such small tails to wag such mighty dogs, it seems we need them more than ever.

And it's very much how it was for the boy who said the Emperor was wearing no clothes. He was alone, a single voice. As Fool, as Jester, as just a little piece of the Rebel in the Soul, he was there as Iai to question accepted truth, to look at the state of the Emperor's wardrobe. The bad news: there's not a lot there. There hasn't been for a long time. The good news: there are fabulous tailors out there and lots of childlike watchers honest enough and brave enough and lied-to enough to keep a needy but uninformed – dare I say gullible? – Emperor looking splendid.

Oh, and a final reminder as far as any presentation of Iai is concerned. We will forget all this.

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